

## **ABSTRACT**

**DISSERTATION/THESIS/RESEARCH PAPER/CREATIVE PROJECT:** Alternative Constructions of Masculinity in American Literary Naturalism.

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This project asserts that male Naturalist authors were not “hypermasculine” acolytes of strident manhood, but instead offer alternative constructions which they portray as less traumatic and more cohesive than prevailing social notions of normative male behavior. I maintain that the rise of the concept of manhood advocated by Theodore Roosevelt in the early decades of the twentieth century contributed to this misconception, for it generated a discourse of “manly” individualism which became equated with socially acceptable performances of masculinity for many Americans. My first chapter illustrates the gradual evolution of an individualistic, violent, and strident concept of manhood, which I label “strenuous masculinity,” through the rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt. The second chapter explores the ways in which Stephen Crane’s fiction illuminates the trauma and confusion inherent in strenuous concepts of manhood. Many of Crane’s stories, like “Five White Mice,” demonstrate the failure of individualism, while others, like “The Open Boat,” document a more positive construction of what I call “homosocial manhood.” In my third and final chapter, I attempt to prove that Richard Wright’s early texts showcase a range of possible outcomes of black male attempts to stand up to racial oppression.

I document that *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* both depict a continuum of confrontation, with individual violence on one end of the spectrum and non-violent group protest on the other. Furthermore, because individual resistance is consistently equated with the suffering and death of the protagonists, my project implies that strenuous manhood also fails to provide a site for effectual and sustainable opposition to the negating forces of racial oppression.